

A ray of darkness

Sometimes the words leap out of the page
at you and yell,
contra John McEnroe
'This is serious!'
More often than not we miss them,
because we may pretend we're reading or listening,
but our minds are far, far away.
Or we're looking for an
Eastenders, Emmerdale, Coronation Street
type of script
bumping along the surface
we don't want to know about the deep things,
or can't be coping with them.
Maybe my job as a preacher

who is himself surrounded by confusion
is to say,
'Hang on a minute,
stay with that particular text,
revisit it,
because it's trying to tell us something.'

We had such a text
almost a throw-away line
in this morning's reading from Isaiah.
Isaiah's getting very excited
that a foreign king called Cyrus,
a gentile,
a pagan,
is liberating the Jews from their endless captivity in Babylon.
Cyrus was not a nice man,

up there with Hitler for cruelty,
a real brute,
yet unwittingly let God's enslaved people
go free.

So Isaiah eulogises him
as if he were another Moses,
releasing his people from tyranny.

That must have caused quite a revolution
amongst the orthodox religious thinkers
of Isaiah's day.

Claiming a brutal pagan was doing God's will
would have been seen as heresy,
would have got Isaiah's book banned from the synagogue.

Then we come to the words
that really leap out of the page at us:

'I am the Lord and there is no other.

I form light and create darkness.

I make weal and create woe.

I the Lord do all of these things.'

I hope those words shock you.

Let's turn them into a creed to maximise their force:

'You are the Lord, there is no other.

You form light and create darkness,

You make weal and create woe;

You, the Lord, do all these things.'

I fear our actual creed, our core belief

is tamer than that,

something along the lines of

'You are a very nice fellow, Lord.

Up there in my top ten people – at least!

The jury's out, I'm afraid,

over whether you or Satan rule our world.

You create light.

You want us to be happy and holy and well.

But when things go wrong

when darkness and weal and woe come

it ain't your department,

you the all-powerful, immortal, invisible,

wouldn't want to dirty your hands

with misery and failure

where faith falls so short.'

That is not what Isaiah is saying:

'I am the Lord and there is no other.

I form light and create darkness.

I make weal and create woe.

I the Lord do all of these things.'

The word weal is ambiguous.

An obsolete form means wealth.

But in the prevailing usage

a weal is defined as

a red swollen mark left on the flesh by a blow or pressure,

beaten with a fist, a whip, a rod or a lash.

Woe is simply great sorrow or distress.

I am the Lord

I make

a red swollen mark left on the flesh by a blow or pressure

I create great sorrow and distress.

Shocking.

Absolutely shocking.

Was Isaiah out of order,
or was he saying something
from hard-won experience
which is maybe difficult to bear,
maybe unpalatable,
but is none the less true?
Certainly the fact that the Jewish Faith
and the Early Christian Church
unequivocally and consistently voted Isaiah in
on their approved list of Scripture
means that we at least have to reckon with what he said.
We may not like it.
It may jar with our present experience.
But we cannot dismiss it as having no value
when both Judaism and Christianity
have consistently affirmed it.

And the Book of Common Prayer affirms Isaiah too.
Not just because the 39 Articles of Religion
uphold the inclusion of Isaiah in the Scriptural Canon,
but because the God who creates
both light and darkness
is behind much of the Prayer Book's theology.
For example.
to quote from the Visitation of the Sick:
'Wherefore, whatsoever your sickness is,
know you certainly that it is God's visitation.'
'I am the Lord and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness.
I make weal and create woe.
I the Lord do all of these things.'
'But surely,' you might complain,

'that makes God into a very monster,
a monster I want to have nothing to do with.'
Even without Isaiah's breath-taking claim,
that accusation is around already.
'You claim God is a loving father,
but what loving father,
if he had the power of God,
would watch his beloved child slowly die
of an agonising cancer.
That God is not a loving father
but a cruel monster,'
so claimed Professor Anthony Flack
a philosopher from Reading.
I am the Lord who creates light and darkness.
Does that make God into a monster?
First, I think we make God into many things.

More often than not
we make God in our own image,
God is a mirror, just a pale reflection of our own face.
With the incarnation,
God becoming man,
at the heart of Christianity
I don't see anything terribly wrong in that,
except that we're often more than a bit limited
about our own image.
I am nice and gentle and long suffering and holy and wise
and never nasty,
and so is my God too.
Whereas in our heart of hearts
we all know
we are a mixture of darkness and light
monster and saint, Jekyll and Hyde,

When God became man he took on board all of that.

I have to admit that I'm not easy with

God creating darkness,

making weal and woe,

but I'm less easy with the idea of

him creating the Devil

and then subcontracting all the nasty bits to him.

As David Lawrence quipped,

'I cannot believe in a God

who created man above the waist,

and then left the devil to the rest.'

Anybody who believes,

as I do,

that God created and creates the universe

has to come to terms

with God having some responsibility

for the lions and tigers

and nature red in tooth and claw and financial meltdown!

Isaiah is saying, from the harshest experience,

'These things are indeed terrible,

but however terrible,

they are not outside God's control.

Take comfort from that.'

You might say that anybody,

god or man

who bears any responsibility for the world's horrors

deserves to be nailed up.

Which God was:

I make and bear weal,

I create and bear woe:

I form light and bask in its warmth,

I create darkness and scream.

John Robinson was a bishop

who set the stuffy Church of England on fire in the 1960s,

defending the lifting of the censorship

on David Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover,

publishing Honest to God

which suggested a level to Christianity

other than the fairy tale.

By 1981 he was the Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge.

He found himself having to speak at the funeral

of a sixteen year old girl

who died in the Yorkshire dale

where he had a holiday cottage.

He said, stumblingly, Isaiah-like,

that God was to be found in the cancer which killed her

as much as in the sunset.

It was an intellectual statement

that was born out in his own experience

when two years later

he died of cancer of the Pancreas.

Robinson made it quite clear that what he didn't mean

was that God caused or sent the cancer.

But what he didn't want to do

was to join in with the conspiracy of silence

of a society which hardly dares to mention the C word.

He did not want to portray a God

who avoided or shunned the cancer,

but rather he wanted to stress that God was immersed in it,

aching with the sufferer lock stock and barrel.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,'

such sufferers may cry out in dereliction with Christ

to the God out there who visits
weal and woe,
cancer and crucifixion
upon his hapless creation.
And they are met by no answer,
not because the God out there
is a surly monster who doesn't even reply to his letters.

They are met by no answer
because God isn't out there,
he is within, impaled on the horror with you.
Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
our Lord quips,
'and unto God the things that are God's.'
There is an irony there,
because everything belongs to God.

There is no limit to God's span,
the darkness, the weal, the woe,
the cancer, the dementia,
God is in them all,
there is nothing, nothing whatsoever in all creation
that can separate you from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Isaiah risks his very name for that.
God stakes,
literally stakes his life on that in Christ Jesus
who came to save us from all that terrifies us.
Or in John Donne's words,
'He brought light out of darkness,
not out of a lesser light.
He can bring thy summer out of winter
though thou have no spring.'